PATTERNS OF POWER

# The Ratchet

*Why hierarchy does not run backwards*

An essay on the recursion

*A case study in the Patterns of Power series*

Thomas J. Bryan with Claude (Anthropic)

*Held as tested, not revealed*

# Contents

THE RATCHET ..... 3
THE OBSERVATION ..... 4
FIRST, NARROW THE CLAIM ..... 5
WHY A RATCHET AND NOT A LAW ..... 7
THE FIRST MECHANISM: SELECTED UNDER FIRE ..... 8
THE SECOND MECHANISM: THE VACANCY REFILLS ..... 10
THE THIRD MECHANISM: SELECTION BETWEEN FORMS ..... 12
THE SMALL-SCALE PROOF ..... 13
WHY SINCERITY IS IRRELEVANT ..... 15
WHAT THE RATCHET DOES NOT SAY ..... 16
THE ENGINEERING PROBLEM, RESTATED ..... 18
WHAT WOULD REFUTE THIS ..... 19

# THE RATCHET

## On why no advanced society with an entrenched hierarchy has ever returned to one without — and why the thing capable of destroying a hierarchy cannot avoid becoming one

*### Thomas J. Bryan with Claude (Anthropic) · held as tested, not revealed*

◆

# THE OBSERVATION

Start with a pattern in the record rather than a theory about it.

Take a society that has passed a certain threshold of scale and complexity — large enough that no one person can hold what it needs to know, settled enough to produce a storable surplus, organised enough to field armed men who do nothing else. In every such society for which we have decent evidence, a small group has come to hold three things together: the capacity for organised violence, the disposal of the surplus, and authority over what is true. Different names, different justifications, different degrees of cruelty and competence, but the same three things in the same few hands.

Now ask the question that actually matters. Once such an arrangement exists in a society, how often has that society afterwards gone back to something without one — and stayed there?

On the recorded evidence, the answer is that it has not happened. Not once, durably, at scale.

This is not for want of trying, and the attempts were not frivolous. Enormous energy, enormous conviction and enormous violence have been directed at exactly this target across three thousand years. Peasant risings, slave revolts, millenarian movements, religious levellings, and — in the modern period — revolutions with explicit programmes of abolition, run by intelligent and serious people who had thought hard about the problem and were often willing to die for the answer.

What they produced, without exception at scale, was a new hierarchy. Frequently a more concentrated one than the one they destroyed.

The Western political tradition's favourite counter-example is the Paris Commune of 1871, which governed a city for seventy-two days and was destroyed with the killing of something between six and twenty thousand people, the range depending on who is counting. Whatever else that is, it is not a durable arrangement, and treating it as evidence that the thing is possible is like citing a building that stood for two months as evidence about foundations.

This paper is about why. Not about whether hierarchy is good — it is frequently terrible, and this collection has spent a great deal of effort documenting exactly how — but about the *mechanism* that makes the pattern so consistent, because a mechanism can be engineered around and a law of history cannot.

◆

# FIRST, NARROW THE CLAIM

The strong version of this observation is that hierarchy is inevitable in complex societies — that it arises wherever the conditions are met, as a matter of social physics.

I do not think that version survives the evidence, and it is worth saying so at length, because a claim defended past its evidence gets discarded along with the part that was true.

Complex societies have existed without a seizable apex. The Kikuyu of central Kenya before British conquest were numerous, agricultural, socially intricate and entirely self-governing, and their authority was distributed rather than concentrated: land held by lineages, men organised into age-sets that moved through graded responsibilities together, and decisions made in councils of elders whose authority came from position in that system rather than from an office anyone could occupy. When Britain arrived it found nothing to capture. There was no throne to sit in, no chief to buy, no apparatus to inherit — and so it had to *manufacture* an apex, appointing headmen who had no standing, and then spend fifty years and a great deal of money holding up a structure nobody believed in. The Igbo of southeastern Nigeria produced the same problem for the same reason, with the same result.

Those are not simple societies. They are complex societies that had not concentrated coordination into a capturable position, and their existence is fatal to the strong claim.

And the deep past is more varied than the standard story allows. The conventional sequence — foraging bands, then agriculture, then surplus, then chiefs, then kings, in that order and by necessity — has been under sustained attack. The anthropologist David Graeber and the archaeologist David Wengrow argued in 2021 that early societies experimented far more widely than the sequence suggests, including with deliberate refusals of permanent authority.

Their most striking case is Teotihuacan, the great central Mexican city, and it is worth setting out properly along with the objections, because it is the strongest single piece of evidence against the strong claim and it is genuinely contested.

Teotihuacan at its height held perhaps a hundred thousand people. Archaeologists have found no royal tomb beneath its pyramids, no depictions of a ruler dominating subordinates in its very extensive murals, and — after roughly AD 300 — a remarkable programme of construction in which the city's population was rehoused in substantial stone apartment compounds of a quality that has no parallel in the pre-industrial world. In most ancient cities elites lived in luxury and commoners in hovels; at Teotihuacan, on the archaeologist Michael Smith's summary, almost everyone lived in a villa. Graeber and Wengrow read this as a city that had a period of authoritarian rule and then, around AD 300, reversed course — possibly by revolution — and governed itself without overlords.

The objections are serious. Saburo Sugiyama holds that the city's rigidly planned layout points to a powerful despot whose tomb has not yet been found. René Millon catalogued considerable evidence of hierarchy and militarism. George Cowgill proposed something more like Renaissance Venice — a republic, but an oligarchic one. Teotihuacano rulers appear to be depicted in Maya art hundreds of miles away, which is odd for a city with no rulers. And the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, reviewing the book, made the fair criticism that Graeber and Wengrow presented as scholarly consensus what is in fact an active dispute.

Note carefully what the alternatives on offer actually are. The leading rival readings are collective rulership and oligarchy. Nobody serious is proposing that Teotihuacan had no coordinating group at all. The dispute is over whether authority sat in one hand or in a council — which, as this paper will argue, is very nearly the most important question you can ask about any society, but is not the same question as whether there was a hierarchy.

So the honest position is this. Hierarchy is not a law of formation. It does not arise everywhere the conditions are met, and societies have gone a long way without it.

But it appears to be a ratchet. Once the three monopolies have been fused in a single coalition in a society at scale, that society does not go back. A ratchet is a worse thing to be facing than a tendency, because a tendency can be resisted at any point and a ratchet only has to be passed once.

◆

# WHY A RATCHET AND NOT A LAW

The reason for the asymmetry is the whole of the argument, and it can be stated in three sentences before it is defended at length.

You cannot dismantle an entrenched hierarchy without organised force.

Organised force at the scale required has requirements: command, discipline, secrecy, logistics, a way of deciding disputes quickly, and a way of dealing with people inside the organisation who will not comply.

A body meeting those requirements is a hierarchy — and, having been assembled and tested under the hardest possible conditions, it is generally a better one than the hierarchy it destroyed.

That is the ratchet. The instrument of levelling is the seed of the next order, and it is not an accidental seed. It is a selected one.

◆

# THE FIRST MECHANISM: SELECTED UNDER FIRE

Take the requirement seriously and follow it.

An entrenched order holds a working monopoly of organised violence. Its army is officered, paid, supplied and practised. Its police know the districts. Its courts function. This collection has examined a great many risings against such orders and the outcome is monotonous: a rising of the unarmed against an intact, backed floor loses, and loses regardless of scale, courage, organisation or justice. In the Andes in 1780 a rebel with dynastic legitimacy, wealth, literacy, both languages and tens of thousands of followers was destroyed and quartered in the square at Cuzco. In Central Asia in 1916 a rising was answered with a programme of further expropriation.

So a movement that intends to win must acquire comparable force. There is no other route, and every successful case took it.

Now ask what an organisation must be like in order to acquire and use such force against a functioning state. It must be able to decide quickly and act as one, which requires command. It must survive infiltration, which requires secrecy and therefore compartmentalisation and therefore a hierarchy of access. It must feed, arm and move people, which requires an apparatus for taking resources and allocating them. It must hold together under conditions where any member's defection can kill the rest, which requires discipline enforced by sanction. And it must resolve internal disagreement faster than deliberation allows, because the enemy is not waiting.

Every one of those requirements is a requirement for hierarchy. Not as an ideological preference — as a functional necessity of the task. An organisation that declines to meet them does not remain egalitarian and win more slowly. It loses, is destroyed, and is not in the record.

Which means a selection process is running on the movements themselves, long before any of them takes power. Of the many groups attempting to overthrow an order, those that develop command, discipline and internal sanction are the ones that survive contact. By the time a movement is in a position to win, it has already been filtered for exactly the traits that make a hierarchy, and it has been filtered under the most demanding conditions imaginable.

And then it wins. And the country it now holds is disordered, its administration wrecked, its enemies armed and its allies uncertain — which is to say, the conditions immediately after victory require the winning organisation's hierarchical traits *more* than the conditions before it did.

The result is not a hierarchy that emerges gradually as the revolution's ideals fade. The result is a hierarchy that was assembled first, tested by combat, and then handed a country.

◆

# THE SECOND MECHANISM: THE VACANCY REFILLS

The second mechanism concerns the third monopoly — authority over what is true — and it is less obvious than the first but at least as reliable.

Begin with why such a position exists at all, because if it were merely a trick then abolishing it would be straightforward.

The philosopher John Hardwig gave the clearest statement of the underlying condition in the 1980s, under the name *epistemic dependence*. His observation is this: in any society complex enough to divide its labour, no individual can personally verify more than a tiny fraction of what he must believe in order to function. You trust the bridge, the medicine, the account of a distant war, the safety of the water, the competence of the pilot — on the word of people whose competence you have no way of assessing. This is not laziness or credulity. It is a structural consequence of specialisation, and it reaches everyone: the physicist trusts the surgeon and the surgeon trusts the historian and nobody stands outside the relay.

The consequence is that a complex society necessarily grows a position of trusted interpretation — somebody who is believed about things others cannot check. Priesthood, ulema, clerisy, academy, party, press, expert body. The position is not manufactured by anyone and would exist if every occupant were a saint, because it is the same thing as the division of knowing.

Now the important part. Because the position is structural, it cannot be abolished. It can only be occupied, contested, or captured.

And here is what the record shows about attempts to abolish it. When a revolution destroys an interpreter class — dechristianisation in revolutionary France, the Bolsheviks against the Orthodox Church, the Cultural Revolution against the scholarly tradition — the position does not stay empty. It refills within a very short time, usually a matter of months, and it typically refills more captured than before.

The reason is mechanical rather than moral. An established interpreter class is usually plural in some degree: rival orders, competing schools, dissenting congregations, jurists who disagree, a heterodoxy the orthodoxy has to argue with. When a revolution destroys the incumbent, it destroys the rivals too — they are part of the same institutional world, and the demolition does not discriminate. What then enters the vacancy is a single body, the revolutionary one, with no competitor, holding a position that had previously been crowded.

So an attack on an interpreter class reliably produces a monopoly where a competition stood. The two legs of the tripod thus have the same reflex: attack the violence monopoly and you must build one to do it; attack the information monopoly and you clear the field for a

purer one.

◆

# THE THIRD MECHANISM: SELECTION BETWEEN FORMS

The third mechanism operates between societies rather than inside them, and it explains why even a genuinely egalitarian settlement that manages internal stability tends not to persist.

A society with a command structure mobilises faster than one without. It can raise, arm, move and direct men on a decision, because the decision has one address. A society organised around assemblies, consensus or federated councils must debate first — and debate is precisely the thing that a war does not allow time for.

That difference is not usually decisive in peace. It is close to decisive in a contest.

The Paris Commune had a hostile national government at Versailles with an army. It lasted seventy-two days. The anarchist collectives of revolutionary Catalonia in 1936, which are the largest genuine experiment in non-hierarchical economic organisation the modern record contains, were dismantled within a year — partly by Franco and substantially by their own side, because the Republic's war effort required centralised command and the Communist party supplied it.

There is a hard version of this observation from the fourteenth century that is worth having, because it shows the same logic running the other way. The Arab historian Ibn Khaldun watched dynasties rise and fall in North Africa and identified the trait doing the selecting: what he called *asabiyyah*, the cohesion produced by shared hardship. A group forged by difficulty — a tribe from marginal land, a religious movement under persecution, an army in the field — holds together in a way a comfortable, settled population cannot, and takes power from it. Then, across three or four generations raised in palaces, its own cohesion softens, and a fresher outside group repeats the operation.

Ibn Khaldun was describing dynastic turnover. The mechanism generalises: hard cohesion beats soft cohesion, and hard cohesion is built by command under pressure. Whatever selects for winners in a contest between organised groups is not neutral between hierarchy and its absence. It has a thumb on the scale, permanently, in one direction.

◆

# THE SMALL-SCALE PROOF

Everything above is inferred from large, messy cases where a hundred things were happening at once. There is a much cleaner demonstration, conducted on an organisation that was trying its hardest to avoid the outcome, and it deserves setting out in full because it removes most of the confounds.

In 1911 a German-Italian sociologist named Robert Michels published a study of political parties, based principally on close observation of the German Social Democratic Party — at that time the largest and most sophisticated socialist party in the world.

Consider how favourable the test conditions were. The SPD was explicitly committed to equality as its central doctrine. Its members were drawn from working people, not from any propertied class. Its internal constitution was deliberately democratic, with elected officers, regular congresses, and accountability provisions written by people who had thought about the problem specifically. It was operating legally, in peacetime, under no military pressure whatever. If any organisation in history was positioned to avoid developing a ruling group, this one was.

Michels found that it had developed one anyway, and he traced the mechanism step by step.

An organisation of any size cannot conduct its business in a general meeting; it must delegate. Delegates must be given discretion, because instructing them on everything defeats the point. Discretion, exercised over time, produces expertise — the delegate learns the files, the procedures, the personalities, the other side's negotiators. That expertise makes him genuinely difficult to replace, and the membership, quite reasonably, does not want to replace him, because a replacement would be worse at the job. Meanwhile the delegate has become a full-time official whose livelihood and identity are now the organisation, and who controls the flow of information to the membership about what the organisation is doing.

At the end of that sequence there is a permanent leadership that is not accountable in any way that matters, and it got there through a series of steps each of which was sensible, necessary, and desired by the members. Nobody seized anything. Nobody betrayed anything.

Michels summarised it in a phrase worth remembering: *who says organisation says oligarchy.* He called it the iron law of oligarchy.

The word *iron* is too strong and the finding has been argued with ever since — there are organisations that have resisted the drift for long periods, usually small ones, usually with high member turnover, usually by paying a real price in effectiveness. But the mechanism Michels identified is not in serious doubt, and its importance for this paper is that it operates *below* the level of violence and *below* the level of scarcity.

It means the ratchet does not require a villain, a war, or a surplus to steal. It requires only that people organise to do something together and that the doing take more than a room's worth of people. Add violence and scarcity and the process runs faster and harder, but they are accelerants, not causes.

◆

# WHY SINCERITY IS IRRELEVANT

A natural objection at this point is that the cases above are cases of betrayal — that leaders who claimed to want equality did not really want it, and that a movement with genuinely committed leadership would produce a different result.

The Michels case is the answer, and it is worth stating plainly because a great deal of political energy has been spent on the wrong variable.

The SPD's officials were not insincere. Many of them had gone to prison for the cause. What produced the oligarchy was not their character but the requirements of the task, operating through choices each of which was locally correct.

And the pattern generalises. Almost every revolutionary leadership this collection has examined contained people of genuine conviction, and their conviction did not alter the outcome by very much. The reason is that conviction is a fact about a person and the ratchet is a fact about a position. A man who has just won a civil war holds a position in which the country is disordered, the enemy is armed, his own coalition is fragmenting, and the instrument that got him there is a disciplined organisation that obeys him. From that position, the options that present themselves are the ones that use the instrument. He can decline — and the historical record of people who declined at that moment is short, and consists mostly of people who were removed by someone who did not.

Which yields the general form: any test that runs on the character of the people who take power is testing the wrong thing. The question is not whether they mean it. It is what the position they now occupy makes available to them, and what happens to anyone who refuses.

◆

# WHAT THE RATCHET DOES NOT SAY

Four things, because a claim this bleak is very easily overread, and the overreading is both false and demobilising.

It does not say all hierarchies are alike. This is the most important qualification in the paper. The differences between orders running the identical mechanism are enormous — the difference between litigating your land claim in a court that sometimes rules for you, and being worked to death in a mine at a mortality rate of one in five a year. Both are hierarchies. They are not the same thing and no one inside either of them would confuse them.

It does not say nothing can be improved. The corpus this paper draws on has identified several variables that move independently of the hierarchy's existence, and each of them changes life at the bottom substantially:

*Whether the three monopolies sit in one hand or several.* This is the single most consequential variable the studies have found. The position of trusted interpretation cannot be emptied — but whether it is held by one body or contested among several is the whole of the available liberty. A society where the courts, the press, the faiths, the parties and the propertied are genuinely separate, and can check one another, is not less hierarchical than one where they are fused. It is differently hierarchical, and it is where every protection anyone has ever enjoyed has come from.

*Whether exit exists.* Where subjects can leave, extractors bid for them. At the silver mines of Potosí in the seventeenth century the same man doing the same work in the same mountain was paid four reales a day when he was there under compulsion and eleven or twelve when he was free to walk — and some of the free labourers were the same drafted men working their off-weeks. Nobody won that. It was walked to.

*Whether guarantees are written down.* The Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution prohibited racial denial of the vote from 1870. Ninety-four years later Black registration in Mississippi was under seven per cent; three years after an enforcement statute with actual officers attached, it was around sixty. The words did not change. What arrived was an apparatus. A written guarantee is a standing option — worthless until somebody with force wants to exercise it, and impossible to exercise if it was never written. That is the least sentimental and most solid argument for constitutions that exists.

It does not say the ruled are powerless. They can reliably move one thing: the price of holding the arrangement. That is real leverage and it has been decisive in the timing and the terms of a great many settlements. What it cannot do is create a reason for the powerful to want the arrangement changed. Which is why a rising succeeds when the benefit has

independently fallen and fails when it has not, and why the same rising ten years earlier buys nothing.

And it does not say the attempts were pointless. Several of them destroyed genuinely worse arrangements. The abolition of slavery, the ending of serfdom, the destruction of the anciens régimes — these replaced one hierarchy with another and the replacements were, for most people inside them, substantially better. The ratchet says the floor cannot be removed. It says nothing whatever about how high the ceiling can be raised or how the space between is distributed.

◆

# THE ENGINEERING PROBLEM, RESTATED

If this is right, then a great deal of political effort has been aimed at a target that is not there, and the misdirection has a cost.

The target that is not there is the abolition of hierarchy in a society at scale. Not because it is morally wrong to want it, but because the only instrument capable of pursuing it is itself the thing, and the pursuit therefore reliably produces a more concentrated version of what it attacked. A programme whose method guarantees its opposite is not a difficult programme. It is a misdescribed one.

What the record does support is more modest and considerably better attested.

Aim at the fusion rather than the existence. Everything that has ever gone well for the people at the bottom of an order has come from the three monopolies being held in different hands by parties who could check one another. Not from their abolition, which has never happened, but from their separation, which has happened repeatedly and by accident. That means the engineering targets are: keep the interpreter position crowded; keep the wealth monopoly prisable from the violence monopoly; keep the courts staffed by people the executive did not appoint alone; keep more than one party genuinely able to win.

Aim at exit. Any arrangement that lets people leave — physically, occupationally, jurisdictionally — is one in which the extractor must bid. That is a structural improvement requiring no one's consent and no change of heart.

Bank options. Write the guarantees down, even when they cannot be enforced, because they can be exercised later by people you will never meet, on a ledger movement you cannot predict.

And watch what an order does to itself. One of the least expected findings in this collection is that arrangements are most endangered not by their enemies but by their own reformers. An arrangement is held up by the number of people who would be ruined by its collapse; opposition confirms everyone's stake, while reform removes stakes one office at a time, for good reasons, with the best intentions. Anyone attempting to change a structure should know that rationalising a chain of intermediaries is the most destabilising thing that can be done to it — which is useful whichever end of the operation you are standing at.

◆

# WHAT WOULD REFUTE THIS

The claim should be falsifiable, so here is what would do it.

A society at scale, with a documented history of fused monopolies, that afterwards ran for several generations without a coordinating group holding disproportionate force, wealth and authority. Not a small community, not a short-lived one, not one embedded inside a larger state that was doing its defending for it. Several generations, at scale, standing on its own.

I do not know of one. I would want to see one before treating the ratchet as anything more than a very strong pattern with a plausible mechanism attached — because the record we have is drawn overwhelmingly from societies that left writing, and societies that left writing are disproportionately the ones with an administrative class, which is to say the ones with a hierarchy. The evidence base is not neutral on the question it is being asked to settle, and that limitation cannot be argued away.

The second thing that would refute it is narrower and more interesting. A revolutionary organisation that defeated a functioning state and then dissolved its own command structure without being replaced by someone who had not. The mechanism proposed here says that is close to impossible, because the position immediately after victory selects hardest for the traits that make a hierarchy. A single well-documented counter-instance would show the ratchet has a release, and finding the release would be worth more than everything else in this paper.

◆

*A note on sources and on what has been explained.* This paper synthesises findings from the case studies in this collection and adds no new primary research. Where scholars are named, their arguments are summarised in plain terms at the point of use: John Hardwig on epistemic dependence, the condition in which specialisation forces everyone to trust knowers they cannot check; Robert Michels on the iron law of oligarchy, from his 1911 study of the German Social Democratic Party; Ibn Khaldun on asabiyyah, the cohesion produced by shared hardship, from the fourteenth-century Muqaddimah; and David Graeber and David Wengrow's 2021 argument on the variety of early social forms, together with the objections to their Teotihuacan reading from Saburo Sugiyama, René Millon, George Cowgill and Kwame Anthony Appiah. The Teotihuacan dispute is live and is presented as unresolved. Casualty figures for the suppression of the Paris Commune are contested and given as a range. The Potosí wage differential and the Mississippi registration figures are established, with their sources and limits, in the studies from which they are drawn. The central claim of this paper — that hierarchy is a ratchet rather than a law, and that the mechanism is the selection of the levelling instrument under fire — is my own reading of the assembled cases, and it should be tested against the next ones rather than taken on authority. --- Part of the collection Patterns of Power. *Tested, never revealed.*